



BECOMING EARL

We are all industrial tourists. Physically we can take only pictures and leave only footprints. Psychically, socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally, we inexorably change all we touch.

**HAL ROTHMAN, *DEVIL'S BARGAINS: TOURISM IN THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN WEST*, 1998**

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I FIRST SAW EARL HOLDING on a crisp and radiant morning in March 1999. As I walked toward the base of the new ski lift on the day of the first running of the Snowbasin Women's Downhill course during the national alpine championships, a tall distinguished-looking gentleman with thick, carefully barbered white hair was standing outside the VIP tent with a smiling older woman with wild curls. I'd seen a single photograph of Earl again and again, the one press shot he seemed to have released for use throughout eternity. I looked at the man, and my heart raced. This had to be Earl. His wife, Carol, stood next to him with one arm in a sling; she must have broken her arm—skiing? I knew she was vital: she had run a marathon at the age of fifty.

Though I'm a photographer as well as a writer, I did not pull out a telephoto and begin to shoot portraits. I did not walk right up and introduce myself. For almost two years I'd been trying to interview Earl Holding—to ask him to tell the story of Utah's Snowbasin land exchange in his own words and urge him to speak about his dreams, his legacy. People inflamed by his actions had spit words like “evil” and “lies” and “treachery” when

they talked about the billionaire businessman's demand that National Forest land at the base of his ski resort be given to him in trade, to privatize and develop. His antagonists—schoolteachers and nurses, lawyers and landowners, stay-at-home mothers and Snowbasin ski patrollers—charged that he and his elite political connections had used the coming 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics as cover and that the state's congressional delegation had willingly lied to support Earl's ends.

How could I broach these accusations at a casual meeting?

I've interviewed hundreds of people over decades of book projects, but they *wanted* to tell me their stories. Though I remained as intent as ever on untangling Earl's role in shaping the destiny of my home territory, I didn't have it in me to confront him. If this reclusive self-made man was so adamant about his privacy, so intent on being a distant presence, then, by God, I would let him be a myth. I dislike conflict. Try as I might, I am no Michael Moore.

So I walked over to the Forest Service yurt and chatted with my ranger and scientist friends—and watched Earl. Within moments he strolled over and began working the crowd. "Hello, I'm Earl Holding." Soft-spoken. He shook hands with each uniformed ranger type. Then he came to me.

He was physically impressive. Imposingly tall and handsome in a clean, smooth way, he loomed over me. He had a terrific shock of white hair—considerably more than remains on my own balding head, though Earl is a generation older. I knew he could be ruthless, but his manner and voice had the same softness as the dinner rolls served at his Little America hotels. His blue eyes were anything but penetrating. They pulled you in, but where they took you was private—a still and unreadable pool.

"I'm Earl Holding."

"And I'm Steve Trimble."

He looked at me quizzically. "And who are you with?"

"I'm a freelance writer, and I'm working on a book about the mountain."

Did he remember my letters and calls—all unanswered? Had any of his minions said anything about me? I couldn't tell from the slight narrowing of his brows. I simply may have seen his leeriness of the press.

He moved on. When it came time for the ceremonies after the race, a line of dignitaries and elders trooped out onto the finish area: Bernhard Russi, the charismatic Swiss Olympic downhill skier and designer of the new Olympic racecourse; foresters uniformed in dusky green Gore-Tex, attempting to stand firm for the American people against Earl's desires even as they crystallized into inevitability; Ogden businesspeople from the little city below

the mountain; ski racers, with their athlete's distillation of goofy youth, jockiness, and smiles with the high-voltage flash of orthodontic triumph and imminent celebrity; Salt Lake Olympics staff humbled by months of international scandal.

And, standing before them, Earl Holding, owner of Snowbasin and Sun Valley and a member of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee until just a month before, when he was forced to resign because of conflicts of interest. The Big Dreamer in a crowd full of dreamers. A Taos Indian woman pressed into service by the Ogden Olympic boosters performed a small blessing and gave Earl a pipe and a fistful of multicolored ribbons. She moved back, leaving Earl, as he grasped this braid of color, to deliver a short welcoming speech.

He thanked God and Bernhard Russi. Then he moved quickly into his more comfortable realm of numbers, reverting to his engineer's soul, telling us how many towers the new lifts had and how much construction had been accomplished. I photographed, burning through film, trying to capture the soul of the man in my camera and exhilarated to see him in the flesh at last. Slightly crazed, frustrated by how many things I wanted to do at once, I set aside my camera as Earl finished speaking and took out my journal.

THE SNOWBASIN LAND EXCHANGE has become an emblematic story of power and land in America. Earl Holding holds the power. Citizens band together to fight him. In theory, the mountain—Mount Ogden—stands above the fray, but privatization can destroy the wildness of the place, corporatize the charm of the beloved recreational paradise, compromise its ecological integrity, and limit access to what once were public lands.

Earl bought Snowbasin, the bankrupt ski area above Ogden, Utah, in 1984. He already owned Sun Valley Ski Resort in Idaho. He also owned the oil company, Sinclair, that generated the money required to follow his dreams. In truth, Earl had almost everything he needed to begin turning the old-fashioned ski area into a mega-resort. Enormous wealth to bankroll development, political connections from a lifetime of insider status in his home state, drive and ambition. He lacked only one thing: full ownership, for though he had acquired nearly ten thousand acres of land around the mountain, the ski area base and the ski runs themselves lay within Wasatch-Cache National Forest. Earl wanted that land to develop, to control, to own.

And so Snowbasin became the scene for a dozen years of conflict. Earl called on the Forest Service to trade him the base of the mountain in ex-

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EARL AND CAROL HOLDING AT THE DEDICATION OF THE WOMEN'S DOWNHILL RACECOURSE, SNOWBASIN, UTAH, 1999.

change for other land he would buy to add to the forest. This wasn't just a line drawn around random, anonymous woods. Earl was asking to privatize public land held dear by the families of citizens who had saved this high mountain basin from overgrazing in the 1930s. Utah's business community and politicians supported him, but the grassroots communities surrounding the mountain joined together to fight the loss of their common heritage. The national environmental community fought the precedent that the mountain could be subdivided at will. The Clinton administration fought Earl's assumption that money and privilege entitled him to special treatment and exemption from regulatory oversight.

When Salt Lake City was named the host for the 2002 Winter Olympics, with Snowbasin designated as the venue for the alpine speed events, the stakes increased sharply. The Utah congressional delegation, led by Congressman Jim Hansen and Senator Orrin Hatch, began legislative maneuvers to give Earl what he wanted. The fact that elected officials were serving a billionaire's whims attracted national attention and became a satellite story to the bribery scandals developing as the Olympics approached. In the months leading up

to the 1996 presidential election the Snowbasin Land Exchange Bill became one more nut in the legislative shell game playing out in Congress.

While following this story, tracing how power determines the fate of land we hold dear and doing my best to penetrate behind closed doors into murky decision space, I found myself one day in a surprising place, standing with my wife on a redrock mesa in southern Utah and building a house there—our house. We concocted a scheme that made it possible for us to purchase the land by splitting the acreage. In doing so, we would become land developers ourselves on a small scale.

I'd never owned land—except for a tiny urban lot beneath our Salt Lake City home—and the notion of owning a wild mesa made me uncomfortable. I began to look for ways to live up to this new relationship I had with a landscape I had always loved fiercely. How could I—a newly invested tax-paying citizen in Wayne County, Utah—best engage with my community, given the realities of small-town America? How do *any* of us engage with our neighbors, and how can we together successfully plan for change and wisely welcome the future? Caught between dreams, we are all greedy, and we all are generous. How then do we create a structure for our communities that expresses our altruism more than our self-interest? How do we give each other the benefit of the doubt and offer at least a moment of grace before we move on to assumptions and judgments and dismissal?

I've watched how Earl uses his power to shape our mutual home; I'm trying to influence the future of my adopted Eden in southern Utah's redrock canyon country, as well. I know where I come from—and I'm still working things out. In Wayne County locals continue to dismiss me first as a wealthy outsider, a second-home owner, a second-rate citizen. It takes years to get past that, and it takes consistent open-hearted behavior and good listening on my part to make progress.

As a lifelong environmentalist I still hold my beliefs fiercely. But in telling Earl's story and in confronting my new identity as a property owner, I've found cracks in the armor of my own assumptions. I have been startled. I have been horrified.

On some levels, I am Earl—we all are Earl.

YOU KNOW THESE PLACES WE CHERISH—the fields, the lakeshore, the park, the riverway. The homey local ski area. They ground our lives and give our communities everyday moments of beauty. You also know the threats and the hunger to speak out, to save the countryside that we remember from childhood or the wild places we discovered in times of need.

Last night your city council voted to turn over the last woods along the creek to developers. There's a heron rookery in those cottonwoods, but there is also money to be made. And your beach? New owners have closed access to South Cove, where families from both sides of town have picnicked and played for three generations. The largest coal company in the world wants to strip-mine Long Ridge, that precious public land on your horizon shielding critical winter range for the healthiest deer herd in the state. The farm that softens the views of marching subdivisions where the highway leaves town—the one with the fading mural of the black cat on an old barn? It's for sale.

Each year land trusts work frantically to preserve open space, wildlife habitat, historic sites, farmland, and rural lifestyles as these scenarios play out, as sprawl slides shut our windows of opportunity at the rate of one square mile of America lost to development every two and a half hours. The preservation tool of choice is the perpetual conservation easement, which allows private landowners to restrict development permanently while continuing to own and use their land in ways consistent with conservation values.

Each year conservation organizations inventory America's most endangered landscapes. The celebrity wildlands lead their lists: Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Greater Yellowstone; Utah's Redrock Canyonlands; Minnesota's Boundary Waters; Florida's Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. All are perennially threatened with incremental or catastrophic loss. Next on the endangered lists come the fragile rivers, overextended or achingly pristine: major watersheds like the Rio Grande, the Susquehanna, the Tennessee, and neighborhood streams like the Little Miami in Ohio, the Trinity in Texas, the Big Sunflower in Mississippi. Vernacular landscapes, too, groan under the weight of haphazard development: historic Concord and Lexington outside of Boston; the corridor along State Highway 99 in California's San Joaquin Valley; the Blue Ridge Parkway viewshed in Virginia; Philadelphia's Schuylkill Marsh; Lower Marks Creek in North Carolina.

Each of us chooses our place, our issue. My stories in this book come from Utah, but the challenge turns up everywhere in America as our open spaces shrink under the combined weight of avarice, inattention, and denial. How do we live ethically on land as it shifts underneath us with changing values, exploding growth, and money and politics wielding brute force? I'm looking for answers.

values.²

We can feel these tensions thrumming across America as we fill in our open space and the twenty-first century begins to reel away behind us.

In southern Utah, in redrock canyons etched into the earth in every direction from the mesa where my family and I have sunk our roots, the drama lags by a beat, for much country remains wild. But while old-timers and newcomers squabble about wilderness and sneer at each other, corporate multinationals swoop in from backstage and hijack the story and the land.

While we fiddle, we trade “community” for “property.” We trade “home” and “neighborhood” for “resort,” “relationship” for “recreation.” I fear for what such wholesale trading across America will do to the spirits of our communities, to the richness of our lives. We know we all are a little corrupt; we mistrust and resent the Other; we fear change. Rome is burning—the vitality of natural landscapes diminishing daily—and we must confront the crisis.

Where do we draw lines? How do we find common ground and work together? What can we do?

The people who reacted to Earl Holding chose from an array of classic American responses to change: a few withdrew into their personal refuges of peace and pastoral solitude; others fought, some by radical acts, some by engaging in the daily grind of democratic process. One even managed to outwit Earl and defeat the powerful man’s drive to have it all. This duel between the personal and the communal, between greed and generosity, lies at the heart of this story.

I continued to observe Earl as a phenomenon and ultimately spent ten years trying to understand just what happened at Snowbasin in this case study of power politics. My relationship with this man remains one-sided; it is a one-way conversation with a subject I’ve never interviewed, a character I’ve imagined as much as described. But it is indeed a relationship, and so I call him “Earl.”

This book—the story of a tycoon, of how we create and use power, of how we choose to place ourselves as individuals, as pilgrims, in a community, on the Earth—begins with an Olympic race on a ski mountain in northern Utah, with a man of immense wealth telling Americans what he would do with their land and proceeding to do it. The story ends in the re-

story. ³

drock canyons of southern Utah, in Wayne County, with a community of citizens pondering together how to respond to change.

We draw our lines, Earl Holding and I, making choices determined by everything we believe, choices that balance ownership and citizenship, desire and restraint. The land's future depends on the reckoning of these decisions in every community, on the choices made by us all.